The Image of Islam and Muslims in Western Culture

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Abstract:

This research paper critically examines the enduring influence of Orientalism as a historical and discursive framework through which Western scholarship has engaged with Arab and Islamic civilizations. While initially presented as an academic discipline, Orientalism has been widely critiqued as a system of representation that frequently produces reductive and essentializing depictions of the "East." In response, the intellectual movement of Occidentalism has emerged as a counter-discourse aimed at deconstructing these portrayals and reclaiming representational agency. This study focuses specifically on contemporary media and film industries as key sites where Orientalist narratives continue to circulate, analyzing how they contribute to shaping—and often distorting—global perceptions of Islam and Muslims. Through a qualitative content analysis of selected Western news media and Hollywood films from the late 20th and early 21st centuries, this paper explores the ideological foundations that perpetuate stereotypical representations and cultural asymmetry. Ultimately, it argues for a more reflective and equitable approach to cross-cultural representation in global media discourse.

Keywords: Orientalism; Occidentalism; Media; Islam; Representation

1. INTRODUCTION

Orientalism can be viewed as one of the principal tools employed by the West to understand how the East thinks—an instrument designed to explore its intellectual and cultural reservoirs. More precisely, Orientalism encompasses all studies produced by Westerners—Europeans, Americans, and Jews—that address the issues of Islam and Muslims, whether in matters of creed, religion, politics, or the arts. It also includes the content disseminated by Western media, whether in their own languages or even in Arabic.

Yet, in return, many Westerners often responded with distortion and hostility— a behavior is typical of those authors that are driven by arrogance and envy. In reaction to this long-standing intellectual tradition, a new wave of scholarship has emerged—penned by Arab thinkers and scholars—seeking to restore some balance in the gaze. These efforts aim to establish an authentic Arab and Islamic consciousness and to create an independent body of knowledge capable of interpreting Western civilization on its own terms, rather than relying on the narratives produced by westerners.

Among the most prominent contributors to this intellectual movement are Edward Said, through his seminal work *Orientalism*, and Hassan Hanafi, through his Introduction to the Science of *Occidentalism*. Together with others, they launched a counter-intellectual movement known as *Occidentalism*, conceived as a natural response to Western domination. This movement sought to deconstruct the myth of Western superiority, to transform the West from the "observer" into the "observed," and to free the Eastern mind from its deeply ingrained sense of inferiority. It called for the construction of a new, confident consciousness capable of confronting Western centrism—especially in light of the immense technological advances that have reshaped the modern world.

Within this context, the present paper offers a modest exploration of one of the most important aspects of Western influence: the role of mass media and cinema in shaping these powerful institutions have repeatedly demonstrated their ability to distort truths, and spread falsehoods. This study seeks to examine many Westerners who claim objectivity and fairness in its portrayal of the "Other," yet persistently strives to disfigure the image of Islam and

Muslims before the global audience. As a result, much of the world has come to rely on distorted, misleading portrayals of Muslim identity—portrayals often shaped by media networks. It is, therefore, imperative for academics to act swiftly and decisively to correct distorted images of Muslims.

The main objective of this paper is to address the following two questions:

1. What are the essential differences between the *Orientalism* and *Occidentalism*?
2. What are the key images that exists in Western culture about Islam and Muslims, and what motives lie behind this representation?

To answer these questions, the study adopts both the historical method and the deductive method, followed by a rigorous analytical approach comprising two main parts: a theoretical framework that defines the relevant concepts and contexts, and an applied section that traces the portrayal of Arabs and Muslims in Western newspapers, magazines, and television programs. The paper concludes with a summary and synthesis of the main findings, offering a glimpse—however brief—into the underlying reality of Orientalist discourse and its implications.

2. The Concept of Occidentalism

The term "Occidentalism" emerged as a direct reaction to Orientalism. To understand its meaning, it is first necessary to clarify what is meant by Orientalism, and then to explore the principal functions that the Occidentalist—if we may use this parallel term—undertakes within the intellectual, cultural, and particularly the Western media and cinematic arenas.

Orientalism can be described as a cultural and epistemological phenomenon nourished by a deep emotional drive to explore the unknown—a mysterious realm veiled by symbols that resist easy interpretation. To the European mind, "the East" was that very unknown space, not merely a distant geographic entity, but a psychological frontier laden with myth and meaning. In the eyes of Western cultures, the East represented a new universe, a defiant continent, an ancient shore standing tall with the pride of its long history—resisting all forms of domination and refusing to yield. (Al-Nabhān, 2012, p. 8)

Thus, Orientalism may be defined as a kind of intellectual exploration—an attempt to uncover and analyze the hidden world of the Orient. Its aim is to

understand the East through a comprehensive study of its thought, knowledge systems, and culture. It is a field devoted to the study of the languages, peoples, heritage, civilizations, societies, and histories—both past and present—of the East.

As Abdallah Mohamed Al-Amin explains in his work Orientalism in the Prophetic Biography, Orientalism represents "an intellectual current encompassing the various studies concerning the Islamic East—its civilization, religions, literatures, languages, and culture". (Amīn, 1997, p 16) Similarly, other scholars define it more broadly as "the science through which Western scholars have studied and analyzed Eastern societies". (Al-Ḥāj, 2002, p. 20) This definition encompasses all groups related to Eastern societies, particularly Arabs and Muslims.

Perhaps the most suitable definition for the purposes of this study is that offered by Mohammed bin Saeed Al-Sarhani who states: "Orientalism is an intellectual movement concerned with the study of Islam and Muslims. It includes all studies produced by Western scholars dealing with Islamic issues in the fields of creed, the Sunnah, jurisprudence, history, and other branches of Islamic studies. It also extends to the writings and programs broadcast by Western media that discuss Islam, Muslims, and their affairs." (Al-Sarḥānī, 2015, p. 3)

At this point, one is compelled to ask: if Orientalism is the Western study of the Islamic East—with all its cultural and scientific richness—then what is Occidentalism, and what are its main functions?

Occidentalism arose as a response to Orientalism—a current seeking to dismantle the dominant Eurocentric paradigm that has long governed global knowledge and culture, particularly with regard to the Arab and Islamic worlds. It is, in essence, the mirror image and the intellectual antithesis of Orientalism. (Ḥanafī, 1991, p. 29)

Eurocentric paradigm refers to a worldview or analytical framework that places European (and broadly Western) history, values, and experiences at the center of global understanding, often treating them as universal or superior to those of other cultures.

From this understanding, Occidentalism can be defined as the study of the West itself—placing Western cultures under critical scrutiny in order to

uncover the often distorted representations that have been propagated about the Arab and Islamic worlds. This does not preclude the possibility of learning from Western knowledge and culture, but such engagement must occur within a legitimate and ethical framework—one that safeguards Islamic identity and prevents it from dissolving into their cultural mould. Otherwise, the latter would only worsen Muslims' state of dependence and confusion.

Thus, Occidentalism emerges as a necessary intellectual response to Orientalism, which has historically disseminated its narratives through influential channels such as media, modernity, and globalization—often perpetuating distorted portrayals of the Arab-Islamic world on a global scale. Accordingly, it falls upon scholars, intellectuals, and cultural producers to critically engage with these representations using contemporary intellectual and creative tools—including scholarship, film, and cultural discourse—with the aim of fostering a more balanced and accurate understanding of Muslim societies worldwide.

In essence, Occidentalism calls for the study of the West—its culture, customs, traditions, and literature. (Al- Namlah, 2010, p. 197) To deepen our understanding of its meaning, we must outline the primary functions it serves as an emerging field of study.

3. The Functions of Occidentalism

A primary function of Occidentalism is to critically engage with Westernization—a global process through which Western cultural, economic, and social models are adopted, often resulting in the reshaping of local identities, practices, and worldviews. In the Muslim world, this influence permeates various domains, including daily life, language, aesthetics, and intellectual traditions. Through critical examination, Occidentalism seeks to counteract the uncritical adoption of Western norms, which can risk eroding cultural distinctiveness and reinforcing perceptions of civilizational hierarchy. It aims not to reject external influence outright, but to foster a conscious and selective engagement that preserves cultural authenticity while participating in global discourse.

Another essential function of Occidentalism is to dissolve the historical inferiority complex that has long governed the relationship between the Arab-Islamic self and the Western other. It also aims to dismantle the Western complex of superiority by transforming the West from the subject who studies into the object of study, and simultaneously to liberate the Eastern self from its sense of inferiority by turning it from a studied object into a subject that studies.

Occidentalism also seeks to eliminate the sense of cultural inadequacy vis-à vis the West, thereby restoring balance to human knowledge. It strives to correct the existing intellectual asymmetry, in which the European consciousness remains dominant. Its ultimate goal is to rewrite world history from a more objective, neutral, and just perspective—one that acknowledges multiple centers of knowledge and restores equity to global cultural exchange. (Ḥanafī, 1991, pp. 29–42)

4. The Difference Between Orientalism and Occidentalism

If Orientalism has been critiqued as a discourse historically implicated in structures of domination and cultural hegemony—often reproducing reductive and at times defamatory portrayals of the Arab-Islamic world—then Occidentalism positions itself as its methodological counterpart. Rather than replicating such asymmetries, Occidentalism aspires to a stance of critical reflexivity and objectivity. It seeks not to invert bias, but to cultivate a balanced and equitable inquiry into Western societies, with the aim of fostering mutual understanding and disrupting longstanding patterns of misrepresentation.

This distinction is clearly articulated by Hassan Hanafi, who states:

"If Orientalism fell into deliberate bias, intentional ill will, and hidden agendas, then Occidentalism represents the ability of the Self—as a neutral consciousness—to view and study the Other objectively, transforming him into a subject of study. The difference is that Occidentalism proceeds from a neutral Self, one that seeks neither domination nor the distortion of the Other's culture, but rather an understanding of its structure and composition. The Occidentalist 'I' is far more honest, objective, and impartial than the Orientalist 'I.'" (Ḥanafī, 1991, p. 32)

In essence, Occidentalism is a natural and legitimate reaction—a moral and intellectual response from peoples whose identity, beliefs, and

truths have long been the target of distortion, falsification, and erasure by the Orientalist Other, who approached the East—its Arabs and Muslims—without fairness or scholarly integrity. His intent was to implant a deformed and stereotypical image of an innocent, unsuspecting civilization, unaware of the conspiracies woven against it.

It is therefore a key task for researchers to critically analyze the representational practices of the Orientalist discourse, to illuminate its underlying assumptions, and to encourage greater scholarly scrutiny of its sources. This critical work is especially vital within media and cinema—dominant channels through which images of Islam and Muslims are produced, framed, and disseminated globally. These representations can shape public perception significantly, often reaching wide audiences with powerful narrative and visual impact. Some scholars argue that such patterns of portrayal reflect deeper historical and ideological tensions, contributing to what has been described as a prolonged cultural and epistemic conflict, driven in part by political and institutional actors with distinct regional and historical stakes. Understanding these dynamics is essential for fostering more balanced and ethical forms of cross-cultural representation.

5. A Glimpse into the European View of Islam in the Middle Ages

Anyone who contemplates the distorted images propagated today by some Western media—whether in print, broadcast, or film—or who examines the deeply rooted misconceptions held by many ordinary people about Islam and Muslims, will realize that such images are probably not the product of the modern era. Rather, they are the continuation of a long-standing legacy of hatred, hostility, and declared warfare against this faith, stretching back centuries.

What has changed in our time is not the nature of the bias and stereotypes but their intensity and the sophistication of its methods. Modern media and cinematic technologies have been utilized, both consciously and systemically, to reinforce longstanding stereotypes, leveraging their persuasive capacity to shape public opinion. Scholarly analyses, such as those by Jack Shaheen in Reel Bad Arabs, document how Hollywood narratives have consistently linked Arab and Muslim characters with violence, fanaticism, and moral inferiority across decades of film production.

Similarly, studies of news framing—for instance, the work of Edward Said highlight how Western media coverage of conflicts in the Middle East frequently employs dichotomous language ("civilized vs. barbaric") and selective sourcing, which amplifies bias rather than challenging it. These patterns are not merely incidental; they reflect institutional practices, market incentives, and at times explicit political advocacy—as seen in documented lobbying efforts to influence film scripts and news reporting on topics related to Israel and Palestine. While not always the result of a centrally "orchestrated" campaign, these representations emerge from a confluence of ideological, economic, and historical factors that perpetuate prejudicial narratives on a mass scale.

If we look back at the image of Islam and Muslims in medieval Europe, we find that the same misrepresentations. The most prominent among them include:

1. Islam is a false and distorted religion.
2. Islam spread through violence and the sword.
3. Islam is a faith of indulgence and sensual pleasure.
4. Muhammad is the Antichrist. (Watt, 2016, pp. 132–136)

6. The Stereotyped Image of Islam and Muslims in Western Culture

6.1 In Western Media

In the contemporary era, global media—encompassing print, broadcast, and digital platforms—holds significant influence over international perceptions and discourse. When employed irresponsibly, media can perpetuate misrepresentations and reinforce stereotypes, contributing to polarization and misunderstanding between societies. In the context of the Arab and Islamic worlds, sustained patterns of selective framing and negative portrayal have been widely documented in academic literature, influencing public opinion and policy in ways that extend beyond regional boundaries to impact global intercultural relations. This phenomenon, however, is not exclusive to any one region or community; media distortion remains a cross-cultural concern with implications for mutual understanding and international stability.

These outlets tirelessly construct negative stereotypes and promote baseless lies that have taken deep root in the global imagination. Their wide reach and repetition have made them powerful agents in shaping public perception. (Ṭāsh, 1993, p. 29) The world's deafening silence today in the face of the genocide, destruction, humiliation, starvation, and violations occurring in Gaza is but a bitter consequence of the false narratives disseminated by these same media empires—narratives that demonize Islam and dehumanize Muslims.

If one examines the sources and channels through which these representations are disseminated, it becomes evident that a wide range of media formats—including print journalism, television, film, literature, and digital content—have contributed to shaping the prevailing imagery. Each medium operates within its own conventions and audience expectations, often reproducing portrayals that simplify or stereotype Arab and Islamic identities. Rather than attributing motive, analysis reveals that the cumulative effect of such portrayals—frequently framed as realistic or authoritative—can reinforce negative perceptions among audiences, regardless of the producers' stated or implicit intentions. Scholarly critique, therefore, focuses on the patterns of representation and their social impact, rather than on assumed agendas behind them.

When one investigates who truly owns and directs these media institutions, the picture becomes clear. Careful research reveals that most international media, particularly in the United States and Britain, are firmly under the control of the Zionist lobby which refers to organized advocacy groups, primarily in Western countries, that work to influence public opinion and government policy in support of Israel and Zionist political goals. As scholars have noted, "Zionist influence within Western media remains one of the most significant and dangerous factors shaping—and continuing to reinforce—the negative stereotypes of Islam and Arabs in the contemporary Western mind." (Ṭāsh, 1993, pp. 135–136)

The main instruments of this control include:

- Ownership of media outlets;
- The large number of Zionist or Pro-Zionist professionals employed within media institutions;

- ❖ Systematic pressure exerted on journalists who express balanced views about Arab causes or who criticize Zionist practices. (Ṭāsh, 1993, p. 137)

To illustrate this, consider a few examples. The Zionist-Australian media magnate Rupert Murdoch owns an empire of over 150 media outlets across four continents. Another Zionist millionaire, Samuel Newhouse, controls 30 daily newspapers, six magazines, six television stations, four radio networks, and 20 cable channels (Ṭāsh, 1993, pp. 138–139). These are but a few examples among the countless Zionist -owned media entities that promote distortions about Arabs and Muslims.

Among the most common stereotypes perpetuated by Zionist and American media is the claim that "Arabs are inherently troublesome and fundamentally negative." (Ṭāsh, 1993, p. 132) This is the dominant image of Arabs—Muslim and non-Muslim alike—in Western media, where scarcely a single outlet can be found free from language that vilifies Islam and Muslims. Some of their headlines include: "Militant Islam," "Islamic Explosion," "The Islamic Threat," "Islamic Terrorism," "The Islamic Giant." (Ṭāsh, 1993, p. 134) Such sensational phrases reveal the deep-seated animosity harbored toward the Islamic world in mainstream western media.

American and European publications such as Le Monde, L'Express, and The Economist have all presented similarly distorted portrayals—sympathetic to Israel and deeply prejudiced against Arabs and Muslims. Their coverage of the Middle East portrays the region as backward, fragmented, and untrustworthy, populated by primitive nomads leading impoverished lives. (Ṭāsh, 1993, p. 81) This pattern confirms that Israel maintains extensive control over Western media, constantly monitoring films, news, and publications to suppress anything that might harm its image while amplifying content that serves its political agenda.

German newspapers, too, have echoed this hostility, publishing inflammatory headlines such as: "Kill Them," "This Will Surely Increase Our Hatred," "Oaths of Revenge," "Cinema Money Funds Terrorism," "They Are Our Dogs," "Bombs in the Holy Land," "Terrorists of the Popular Front," "Barbarism," "Brutality as a Path to Victory."

Yet, when the subject turns to Israel, the tone softens dramatically, with titles like: "The Song of Heroes Plays Again," "The Truth of the Israeli Victory," "Donate for the Children of Israel," "Humanity Instead of Barbarism," and "Israel Is Ready to Negotiate." (Ṭāsh, 1993, p. 88)

Such a lack of objective reporting stands in contrast to the findings of international bodies. For example, the UN Human Rights Council and various UN Special Rapporteurs have repeatedly documented actions by Israel that may constitute violations of international humanitarian law. Additionally, the International Court of Justice (ICJ), in its 2004 Advisory Opinion on the West Bank barrier, ruled that its construction violated international law. These authoritative assessments offer an evidence-based counterpoint to one-sided media narratives. It is true, savage nature has been exposed to the world, particularly in its most recent war on Gaza.

6.2 The Image of Arabs and Muslims in Western Cinema

The Western world quickly recognized the enormous power of cinematic media to transmit news, promote policies, and carry out intrigues. Their objective is to manufacture a generation that hate Arabs and Muslims regardless of rank, ethnicity, or age. Even children have been taught to despise their Muslim peers. This is undeniably a sinister Zionist policy—hostile to Islam and Muslims—a doctrinal and religious war that will end only with the destruction of one side or with the dissolution and assimilation of the Self into the Other (or vice versa); only then would there be acceptance and complacency — a prospect that remains virtually impossible. Under this heading, we present some of the distorted portrayals — for the Muslim reader, especially younger generations lacking a historical awareness — so that they may grasp the imminent danger.

Hollywood is the factory and nerve center of such films: it constructs stereotypical Arab images through performative representation (Shaheen, n.d., p. 18). As noted earlier, Zionist control over such media is evident: Zionist interests finance and back any film that stains the reputation of Arabs and Islam, while suppressing even the slightest attempt to blemish their own image.

Hollywood has, in practice, often operated under the sway of Zionist political interests, whether intentionally or not. Evidence of this influence is the racist imagery produced and circulated. Many films and television series. Numerous studies have demonstrated this pattern. For example, between 1929 and 1956 Hollywood produced 231 cinematic serials whose portrayals depicted Eastern characters as villainous figures plotting the destruction of the white race, just as Blacks were frequently portrayed as ignorant creatures subordinate to tribal chiefs. (Shaheen, n.d., p. 27)

Many films sow discord between African and Arab peoples by reviving tribalism and factionalism, thereby dividing and weakening them — for division is weakness.

Scholarly forums have occasionally been utilized to advance politically-framed historical narratives. One notable example is the international symposium titled "Slavery in Muslim Africa," held in the 1970s under the sponsorship of Israeli academic institutions. At this conference, several Israeli scholars presented papers emphasizing the historical role of Arab and Muslim traders in the African slave trade, framing it in a manner that implicitly cautioned contemporary African states against political or economic alignment with the Arab world. This example illustrates how academic platforms can be employed to shape perceptions of history in ways that serve specific geopolitical narratives and foster regional divisions. (Ṭāsh, 1993, p. 57)

Tracing the representational history of Western cinema reveals a persistent pattern of stereotyping Arab and Muslim identities, beginning in the silent film era of the 1920s with portrayals of lecherous sheikhs obsessed with women and wealth, anchored in exoticized settings of deserts and camels that implied cultural backwardness—a trend that intensified in mid-20th century productions such as The Thief of Baghdad (1940), The Mighty Crusaders (1958), Captain Sinbad (1963), and Desert Attack (1960), which collectively framed Arab and Islamic cultures through lenses of menace, fanaticism, and deceit, thereby constructing a enduring cinematic vocabulary that reduced diverse societies to monolithic and frequently antagonistic stereotypes. (Ṭāsh, 1993, p. 98)

In the 1970s Hollywood produced many films that continued this trend of denigration. Films such as The Wind and the Lion (which recounts a fictional tale of Arabs kidnapping an American woman and demanding a ransom from President Roosevelt) and Black Sunday (in which a group of Arabs conspires to massacre spectators at a U.S. soccer match) (Ṭāsh, 1993, p. 98) illustrate these recurring motifs. Muslim women, too, have not escaped this degradation; they are frequently depicted as dangerous terrorists. One example is the film titled Federal Agents Versus World Crime Syndicate, which features an Egyptian woman named Naila as the first female Arab terrorist in cinema — a bloodthirsty character who incites her cohorts to invade the United States and rise up against perfidious Westerners. (Shaheen, n.d., p. 27)

A critical examination of this dynamic suggests it functions as a form of cultural conflict, where influence is exerted not through conventional force but through narrative control, strategic representation, and the polarization of discourse. The limited international response to these representational patterns—often characterized by oversight or tacit acceptance—reflects a broader complacency regarding the long-term societal impacts of media-driven stereotypes. This approach risks normalizing reductive and antagonistic perceptions, which may, over time, cultivate a generalized climate of suspicion and division targeting Arab and Muslim communities worldwide.

7. Contemporary Cinema and the Intensification of Distortion

Modern films, too, have not spared Arabs and Muslims from distortion; on the contrary, the defamation has become even more aggressive. It no longer stops at mere misrepresentation or insult — it now extends to incitement and calls for revenge against Arabs and Muslims. Among such works are Three Days of the Condor, Network, The Black Gold File, and Right and Wrong (Ṭāsh, 1993, p. 100), all of which carry implicit or explicit messages demonizing the Arab and Islamic world.

Even children have not been spared from this insidious Zionist agenda. Animated films have been deliberately crafted to raise generations that despise Arabs and Muslims from the earliest stages of their lives. Researcher Abd al-Kadir Tash notes that:

"The American child grows up from his earliest years hating Arabs — or at least despising them. Through a variety of animated television programs, he watches his favorite heroes defeating these evil Arabs and saving the world from their conspiracies and wickedness. Here is Popeye, flexing his famous muscles as he beats up an Arab sheikh dressed in a wolf's cloak; Batman hurls a rotten egg in the face of an Arab sultan; Laverne and Shirley foil an Arab sheikh's attempt to invade America and destroy the world; and in the Tarzan series, Arabs are shown killing black men and women and selling black children in slave markets." (Shaheen, n.d., pp. 14–15)

This is but a glimpse — a mere drop in the ocean — of the grotesque images of Islam and Arabs that fill their cinematic universe.

8. CONCLUSION

At the conclusion of this modest and concise study — limited by scope and resources but grounded in sincere inquiry — we have arrived at several essential findings, summarized as follows:

Orientalism represents the West's method of exploring and mastering the East — in its culture, science, religion, arts, and even its ways of living and interacting — in order to respond, confront, and ultimately dominate it. Occidentalism (or al-Istighrāb) is the natural and necessary response — a study of the West's own cultures, literatures, philosophies, arts, and media, undertaken from the perspective of the Self observing the Other.

The two differ profoundly in intent and spirit: while Orientalism has often fallen into bias and negative stereotypes, Occidentalism expresses the Self's neutral and conscious capacity to see and study the Other objectively. The "I" of Occidentalism seeks neither control nor distortion; it strives for understanding — a moral, intellectual, and impartial pursuit far more objective than that of Orientalism.

Occidentalism, therefore, becomes an effective method for dismantling the West's complex of superiority and restoring the Muslim Self's confidence and intellectual sovereignty.

Media and cinema have become dangerous tools manipulated by hidden powers to achieve political ambitions that could not be realized through direct means — ambitions pursued instead through deception, narrative

manipulation, and cultural infiltration. Occidentalism arises as a necessary intellectual and ethical response to expose and confront these illegitimate and morally reprehensible tactics.

The image of Islam and Muslims continues to suffer from distortions and baseless accusations entirely detached from reality.

Zionist powers actively strive to cultivate generations that despise Islam and Muslims, producing even children's cartoons in which Arabs and Muslims are consistently cast as villains.

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